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AKA's Neighborly Upgrade

By Dana Rubenstein

The Korman family, of Pennsylvania, has been both influenced by and an influencer of architects. The reigning cast of the four-generation real-estate family grew up in a house in Fort Washington designed for them by Louis Kahn, one of the great modern architects of the 20th century.

At the same time, the family real-estate company, Korman Communities, has built tens of thousands of houses, apartment buildings and commercial properties hiring many an architect along the way.

The latest result of these cross currents can be seen in Manhattan in a \$100 million upgrade being made to four hotels acquired between 2004 and 2007 by Korman's AKA extended-stay hotel brand. On one hand, AKA is going for a high-design New York hotel.



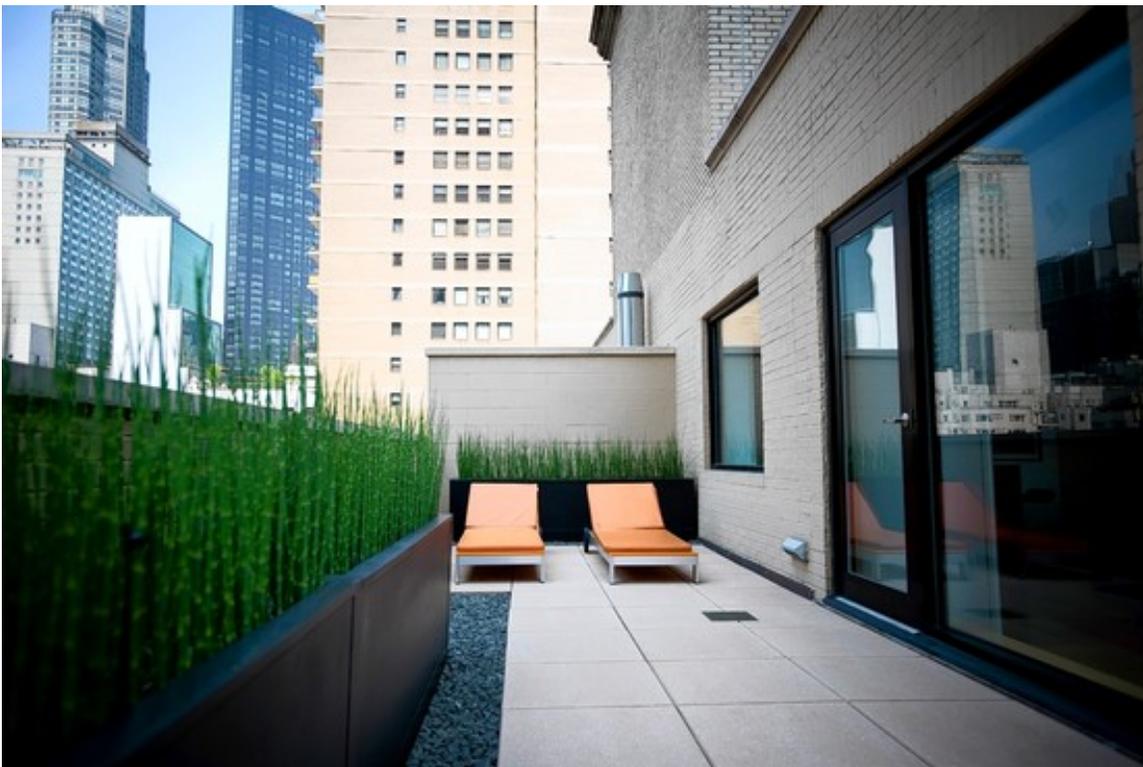
The lobby of the AKA Central Park.

Rob Bennett for The Wall Street

On the other, AKA is seeking to make the properties comfortable enough for a long-term residence. With the average guest staying more than three weeks, and often as long as three months, AKA is trying to ensure that style and class don't eclipse comfort. The result: the sort of subdued style one might find in a wealthy uncle's home, rather than the sort of overweening hipness to be found at the latest boutique hotel.

"It was very important for us to have a totally different design vernacular than a Four Seasons, or an Ian Schrager," says Larry Korman, a partner at AKA.

Mr. Korman, who is spearheading the redesign effort, has taken pains to make each AKA jibe with the surrounding neighborhood.



The terrace of a penthouse apartment.

Rob Bennett for The Wall Street

The 76-suite AKA Sutton Place, for example, caters to a somewhat older crowd. Mr. Korman kept the existing oak paneling in the lobby, and hired Meyer Davis Studio to convert the former Il Valentino restaurant into an oak-panel-accented cafe and lounge for the hotel's residents.

The formerly pink-tiled pool in the basement, which the manager says looked like it belonged in a YMCA, now has the dim lighting and desert-colored hues of a high-end spa in Arizona. "When you think about Sutton Place, you think about prewar, classic, sort of snobby, oak panels, classical detail," says Will Meyer, of Meyer Davis. "What we've done is we sort of freshened it up."

AKA Central Park, a 134-suite hotel on 58th Street, has a strikingly different, more modern aesthetic, one that might appeal less to an distinguished businessman, and more to that distinguished businessman's 40-something son. The redesign was overseen by HLW International, in collaboration with Studio IntraMuros, AvroKO, Steven Learner, and Nicholas Cardone. The guest-only bar has the exclusive feel of a modern-day cigar lounge, with two gas fireplaces, and mustard and brown asymmetric furniture by Ligne Roset.

"We get A-list celebrities who don't want to go to a public bar or club, that come here," says Elana Friedman, a spokeswoman for AKA Central Park.

LED lights in primary colors accent certain walls. On the penthouse floor, the lights between the doors can be changed to satisfy a demanding guest's whim. In the lobby, there's a video artwork depicting jellyfish ballooning and then deflating, designed by Mr. Korman. In the gym below, a Monika Bravo six-panel video installation depicting reflections on water casts natural-seeming light on the machines below. Patinaed stainless steel coats the hotel in abundance.

At the AKA Times Square, Mr. Korman is building a two-story sky lounge with architect Piero Lissoni on the penthouse level, directly across from where the New Year's Eve ball drops.

"It's going to be very cool," Mr. Korman says.